

Italian passion hidden behind consistency of form, J. F. Pressenda

Tsutomu Miyasaka, PhD

Toin University of Yokohama, Email: miyasaka@toin.ac.jp

Francesco Pressenda was a major benchmark during the 19th century in the history of Italian violin making. He received recognition and high reputation for the strong influence of his own style on all later violin makers in Turin and hence, attracted many violin lovers. Born in 1777, at Lequio-Berria in Alba, a town of Piedmont region in the north western of Italy, Pressenda started learning violin making quite late, while he was turning 40, after he moved to Turin around 1818. Being under the domination of Napoleon (1802-1814), city of Turin under France Empire had imbibed French cultures and business in every aspect of life. According to comprehensive research of Turin's violinmakers by Eric Blot [1], Pressenda was trained at a workshop of French violin maker, Lété-Pillement, and later, possibly by partnership with Joseph Calot until he set up his own workshop in around 1821. We can see such French influence in Pressenda's crafts which can be compared to the style of French masters such as J. B. Vuillaume (1798–1875) whose work often displays a flawless finish with mathematically refined form. While Vuillaume was working between variations of forms of Cremonese and Brescian masters, Pressenda was consistent in staying on his own models. However, his Italian character that personalizes his work appears in peculiar quality of varnish, for which Pressenda has carried out more flexible experiments, especially on the process of ground coating and composition of coloured overcoat. Such trials did not always produce good results and some varnish easily absorbs ambient moisture to result sticky surface. Interestingly, we cannot find any co-worker of Pressenda who has shared the master's recipe of varnish, even for Joseph Rocca [1-3]. Nature of varnish distinguishes Pressenda from contemporary French makers who collaborated Pressenda such as Pacherel. I will discuss this point later.

I had reported the distribution of number of instrument made by Pressenda through his life in my previous article in 1998 [4], which is updated by accumulating twice more data, as displayed in **Figure 1**. The graph exhibits distribution of total number of instruments (violin, viola, cello) made per year by Pressenda all through his working life (1820 to 1850). The source of data is based on my investigation of his authentic instruments either owned by private owners and/or players or came out for sale in auctions and shops. Some instruments are in pristine conditions bearing original neck and untouched varnish. Although most of the instruments have been certified by renowned experts, there were violins sold as work of Pressenda whose authenticity cannot be compromised due to the quality of varnish and wood cutting work. Instruments worked by Pressenda are discernible, without much difficulty, from

layout of arching and construction, fashions of wood cutting work and edge work, varnish type, etc., which are highly consistent in his work. Total numbers of works collected here includes 228 violins, 17 violas, and 13 cellos, in which 21 could not be located about the date (year) of making. Relatively large number of Pressenda instruments have been found in good preserved states bearing his original labels, manifesting how his products were treasured by players and collectors. Date of making can be determined or estimated not only with original label but also by type of wood figure in the back plate. Work of Pressenda can be classified into three periods [4]. First period (before 1825) shows his trial in choosing the style of soundbox from those having more rounded C bouts by using a back plate with either narrow or board flame. Second period (1825-1829) is easily discerned by the Strad pattern with square C bouts and use of narrow figured back wood frequently marked with a sap line. His decided form (Strad-Guarnerian blend) started in 1831 which he has been using until the last of his career. As seen in the graph, Pressenda has been prolific in violinmaking for 20 years from 1826 to 1846, with enhanced activity particularly from 1828 to 1837. Taking into account recent lack in data of new instruments that I have collected after my 20 years search, I believe that the number of instruments presented here corresponds to more than 70% of total instruments made by Pressenda and the maker possibly made more or less 320 instruments. This number also gives some hint to reconsider about Pressenda's collaboration with his pupils (Joseph Calot, Pierre Pacherele, Leopold Noiriel, and Joseph Rocca). Christophe Landon concluded in his report [5] based on the similarity of their wood work that the French maker Pacherele was most likely assisting the master by supplying unfinished instruments in white, which Pressenda finished by varnishing and labeling. There is no doubt that the peculiar soft varnish of Pressenda, a great feature of his instrument, is worked by Pressenda himself as we find no pupil, including Joseph Rocca, who apprenticed in his workshop used the same recipe of varnish. If the co-worker was strongly collaborating and Pressenda himself was also making the whole instrument, 10 to 15 instruments a year as seen in this graph, or expected maximum of 20 or more including the instruments that I could not find, is too small as outcome. Rather, it is a reasonable activity for a single violinmaker. The expected total instruments of Pressenda (ca. 320) is one tenth the number from the Vuillaume workshop (more than 3000) that got the benefits from French Mirecourt system employing apprentices and collaborators for violinmaking. Therefore, I assume that contribution of Pacherele and other collaborators in supplying whole violin body to the master must be limited to a few portions of the Pressenda instruments. In other words, although strongly inspired by the master's work, instruments made by these pupils have been appraised and sold in the market as their own work rather than Pressenda. Regarding the contribution of Joseph Rocca, I mentioned my previous report [4] the influence of his assistance in the number of products which shows a broad peak in 1830 to 1837 and a drop in later years when Rocca left the

workshop. This drop is still found in 1838 and 1839 with activity lacking in viola and cello making. Hence, it can be deduced that Rocca was helping to produce instruments in the workshop in 1837, achieving a pronounced increase in activity.

It is quite certain that Pressenda varnished all instruments (including the ones made by his apprentices) sold in his workshop by himself and labeled them with hand-written date. After around 1830, Pressenda used the same label printed by hard stamp tool having a set of same alphabetical characters throughout his life. Positions of characters in two line layout were swinging between two types, as displayed in **Figure 2**, possibly due to shifting or adjustment of characters set in the stamp. Here, “Pressenda q. Raphael” indicates “Pressenda quondam (once) Raphael”. Therefore, there is a hypothesis that Raphael is his civil family name (father’s name) and Pressenda was a pen name which Francesco later used as artist. The hand written date is the maker’s very personal mark (stamp) as an element of appraisal. Date frequently remains in clear black without fading nature and is possibly written by using a black paint used for scroll edge painting rather than writing ink although date of later instruments display fading due to use of ink. In addition to his aesthetic way of scribing numbers in large letter, printed characters strongly press the paper with edges of outlines showing up like relief (**Fig. 2**), which makes his original label discernible even for non-experienced eyes.

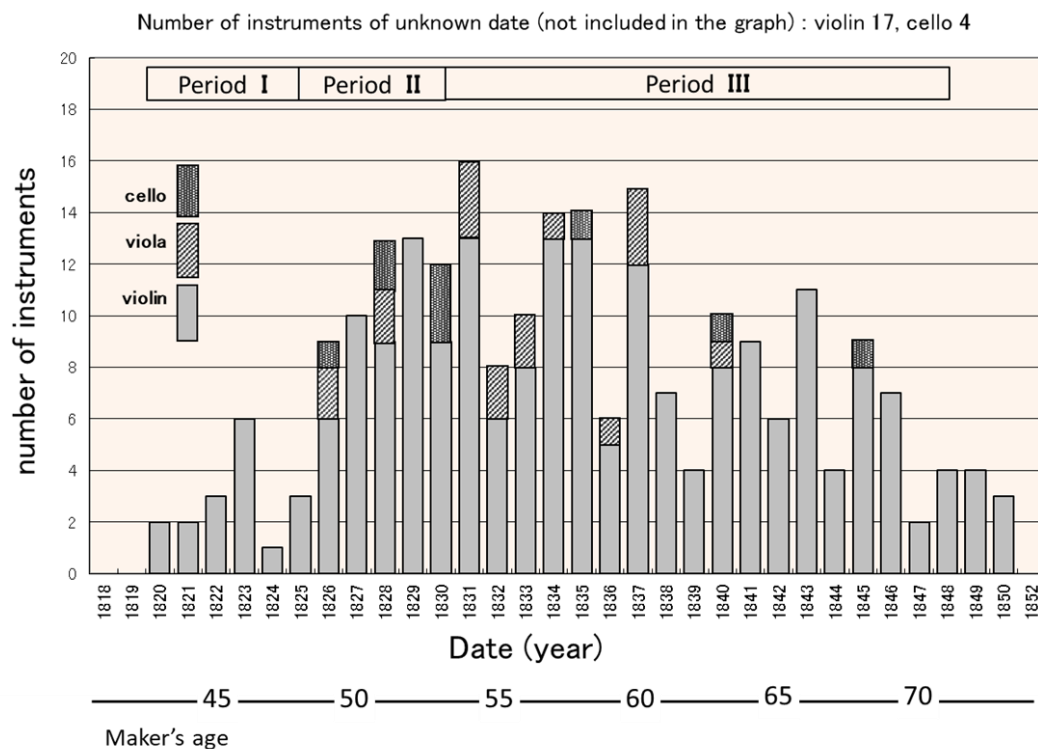


Figure 1. Number of instruments made by J. F. Pressenda through his whole life.



Figure 2. Original Pressenda labels and unique handwritten date: (a) whole label of 1834 violin (illustrated in Figure 4) and different positions of letter alignment between upper and lower lines (as marked with dotted lines) for 1834 labels, (b) characters strongly printed on label paper show edges enhanced like relief.

While viewing features of 228 violins, a noteworthy aspect of Pressenda's working style that stands out prominent is the high consistency in the dimensions of his crafts. **Figure 3** shows the distributions of the lengths of body and sound stop. The distribution also includes information of violins made of one-piece back and two-pieces back. As generally said, Pressenda preferred to use one-piece back, in particular, using plate having vivid regular flame. Such preference appears in this graph which shows 200 of 228 violins (almost 90%) collected here to be built with one-piece back while the instruments of two-pieces back constitute a minor portion (marked with triangle). Regardless of the type of back, all violins were made with standard 14 inches length of back and majority is in the range of 35.5 ± 0.1 cm. The stop length, which is also consistent, is in most case shorter than 19.5 cm, varying in the range 19.35 ± 0.15 cm. Joseph Rocca also worked consistently with 14 inches body length but with sound stop set at a standard ~ 19.5 cm. Other parts of construction including lengths of middle bout, ribs, and sound holes also show consistent dimensions. The only single exception that I have encountered is the one having 36.0 cm length and it was certified as a Pressenda by Hill (as plotted in open circle as 1834). However, its authenticity is suspicious due to its construction (one-piece spruce table, etc.) and false label. Violas reflect similar

consistency to violins. But the maker was stuck to make a small size viola, which seems to have been the fashion in France during the 19th century. With preference of one-piece back, their size never exceeded 40 cm in length. Of 15 violas with known dimensions, average length for 12 violas is 39.3 cm with the largest and shortest equal to 39.5 and 39.0 cm respectively. However, interestingly, three violas made in 1837 (when Rocca must have been assisting) are exceptionally small with size; 38.2 to 38.5 cm, which are too small for today's player to choose. Cellos are in standard size; 13 cellos (half of them have one-piece back) are in the range of 74.0 ± 0.5 cm and are fairly smaller than Frenchmaker's size at that time. To summarize, Pressenda's craftsmanship is characterized as producing a constant model with almost no deviation from his decided dimension and construction. This makes me curious about the viewpoint that there must have been players or collectors during that time who requested the maker to provide a particular model such as long Stradivarian size, compact Guarnerian type layout, etc. If there were no such direct communication between Pressenda and his clients, it can be assumed that Pressenda was selling violins from his shop ("Pressenda & Co", business note as found by Blot [1]) as a ready-made model rather than running the business via his individual contact with local clients. At his time, violinists G. B. Polledro (conductor and concertmaster of Turin's opera house) and his successor Guiseppe Ghebart were strongly supported the business by mediating the sale of Pressenda's products to their members and pupils. It cannot be also ignored that Count Cozio di Salabue (1755–1840) and Luigi Tarisio (1796–1854), both being Piedmontese, possibly remained as two major clients at Pressenda & Co. While Salabue was possibly too old to explore local violin makers Tarisio was then active in trading violins. For securing funds to acquire old violins, he bought Pressenda violins and sold them outside Italy, some of which were acquired by London-based violinist August Wilhelmj. Further, Nicolo Paganini (1772-1840) was then at his heyday of performance. According to a note by Turin-based maker Evasio Guerra, Paganini tried a Pressenda violin made in 1837 (later owned by Wilhelmj) when he visited the workshop during his performance at Teatro Carignano and admired its quality. Such stable clients and players interested in his instruments encouraged the maker to stay on its constant style and dimensions. But, Pressenda took a special care to appeal his clients by personalizing his work with Italian characters that distinguished his work from French masters. In addition to beautiful regular flamed one piece back which was inspired from Stradivari's best crafts, Pressenda created original recipe of varnishing to show peculiar effects which is rarely found in French makers. Furthermore, he intentionally avoided flawless perfection in handicrafts by leaving footmark of Italian violin maker's style as knife-cutting work in the corners and interior of sound box. It is also considered that Pressenda was conducting experiments on acoustic effect of the sound box including modification of plate thickness. A purpose of such

experiments must have been creation of powerful sound to satisfy the soloists of the era such as Paganini, playing 19th compositions rich of double-notes.

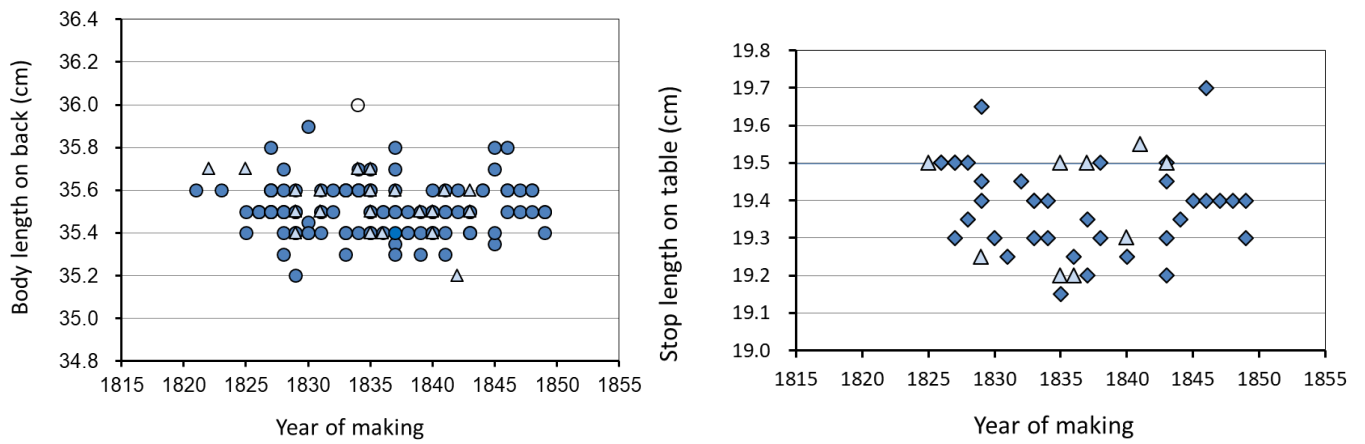


Figure 3. Body length and sound stop length of Pressenda violins in the course of the maker's active year.





Figure 4. Pressenda violin made in 1834 displaying typical craftsmanship of the maker. The above right shows peculiar contrast of varnish colour soaked in wood between spring (darker) and summer (lighter) grains. Lower left, endpin area shows one-piece side plate. Lower right, layout of slightly tilted flames between side and back plates.

The photographed violin in **Figure 4** was one example made for such powerful sound production. It was made in 1834, which was from the Pressenda's most prolific time, and carries all of the maker's characteristic features described above. This violin is a twin to the violin (1834) owned by violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja [6] and both were made of the same lot of spruce and maple woods. Notable point showing the maker's attempt of strengthening sound is that the sound box is made of combination of wide grain spruce (table) and fairly thick maple plate (back). The latter is 5.8 mm thick in the center. Such combination is inspired by Guarneri del Gesu Cannone violin (1742) which also has a wide grain table and a considerably thick back plate (6.0-6.3 mm in center) [7]. The dimensions of sound box are typical; body lengths are 35.6 cm with upper bout 16.65, middle bout 11.25, and lower bout 20.65 cm. It has sound stop of 19.4 cm. Rib height is 3.1 cm in lower bout, increasing up to 3.3 cm in upper bout. Table is two pieces spruce with regular grains but the grain is very wide and broad at the flanks. Such choice of soft wide grain (low density wood) is effective in enhancing bass sounds, similar to the violins of del Gesu, and may have been selected by the maker for its acoustic merit. Dendrochronological analysis of top spruce by John Topham showed good matching of the ring pattern with that of other Pressenda (dated 1835) but did not find any fitting of result with his stock of data from Cremona violins, indicating that the wood used by Pressenda comes from other source of trees. Blot mentioned that Pressenda had a stock of all the wood he needed possibly from a French maker/dealer, Thiriot family of Mirecourt [1]. Arching of the table shows characteristic "Pressenda" arch. It immediately starts at the inside of purflings at flanks and forms a wide plateau field around the center, which creates a glamorous appearance together with the effect of relatively wide middle bout. The back is made in one-piece with vivid regular flame almost horizontal but somewhat ascending to the right flank. This slightly slanted horizontal flame was favourite layout of

Pressenda and was frequently used in his other works. Pressenda always used small two pins in upper and lower back to fix the plate, which are put inside or almost touching the purfling. Unlike the great predecessors, Amati and Stradivari, who tucked (inlaid) purfling after pinning the plates and completing soundbox, Pressenda was putting pins in the back plate to which purfling had been inlaid before assembling the soundbox. This became the general way for later Italian makers. **Figure 5** shows how these different workflows result in the finish of purfling in two examples. A pin below button is cutting the purfling edge on a Pressenda violin while pin was cut by purfling on a Stradivari violin (Messie, 1716) [8]. Purflings are cleanly inlaid with thin dyed wood sandwiching white beech. At C bout corners, two purflings join together with their tip directed to the center of the corner edge, not like the manner of Stradivari who oriented the purfling tip towards the inside of C bout. Intentionally or accidentally, Pressenda frequently leaves mark of purfling tracer (double lines) which is extended to corner. Such marks are flaw in crafting, however, he did not mind leaving such evidence of handicraft.



Figure 5 A pin fixing the back plate is cutting purfling in a Pressend 1829 violin (left) while pin was cut by purfling in the Stradivari Messie violin [8].



Figure 6. In interior, the surface of a C bout rib shows a stained feature of liquid varnish penetrated from the external surface as a result of ideosyncratic recipe of varnish coating.

ff holes are Stradivari/Guarneri hybrid pattern accompanied by characteristic fluting of lower wings. Wood of ribs has regular but narrower flame than the back and matches that of scroll. On the bottom, around end pin, rib wood was divided by double purfling, but the wood is continuous and in one piece. This is also the style used by Stradivari. Similar to the back, rib was cut so that the flame is slightly slanted from right angle. This makes the layout of flames on the sides of violin running inversely between right and left sides. And the flame of rib runs inversely to that of the back when seen from the side (**Fig. 4**). This asymmetric layout, which is found in many of other Pressenda violins, adds an aesthetic effect to the appearance. Scroll has unworn edges leaving black-inked chamfer. Pressenda was painting the black edge on the coat of varnish, therefore, black paint is easily worn off. The maker did not care to leave a gouge mark (a thin black line) along the central ridge of the spiral. Undercutting of spiral is considerably deep. This has an effect to highlight the edge of spirals. Rear end of the scroll shows a turn of spiral with ample curvature comparable with the head of spiral. These shapes of scroll are essentially different from those worked by J. Rocca. Eye of spiral is fairly large but smaller than that used by the maker in his early period (before 1830). Whole feature of deeply carved scroll would indicate that Pressenda was treating the scroll as an important trade mark of his craft from aesthetic viewpoint. Beauty of the flame of one-piece back and elegant scroll are considered to be helpful for selling violins of Pressenda & Co. to general clients. Pressenda was plotting to ensure additional value of his instruments concerning the quality of varnish, which might have resulted from a considerable number of trials/experiments. Oil-based amply thick varnish layer in reaction with the texture of wood surface displays a unique appearance. Pressenda did not (or could not) complete pore filling treatment of wood by hard undercoat using colourless varnish. On spruce, coloured varnish tends to infiltrate into the soft wood surface, exhibiting inverse change in colour density between spring/winter grain (hard) and summer grain (soft). This produces spring rings dyed lighter with coloured pigments than the summer grain [4] (see insertion of **Fig. 4**). Such varnish frequently turns to be very soft, especially under humid ambient air, and thus, bothers players to protect the varnish against sweat. This fact suggests that the maker was using varnish recipe rich of hydrophilic ingredients. For other violin made in 1835 (illustrated in ref. [2]), a part of rib was found to have suffered penetration of liquid varnish from external surface to the interior surface, as displayed in **Figure 6**. Such nature of varnish and its coating recipe that the maker created may not work well for practical protection of the wood due to lack in forming surface passivating layer (skin). In addition to his varnishing work, we find extremely dark varnish coated on his many violins made in around 1834. Although it is a mystery why the maker tried such dark varnish, one possibility is that these violins were made to attract players who prefer masculine appearance and dark powerful sound inspired by the

colour. In her interview with this magazine [6], Kopatchinskaja commented that she preferred powerful sound projection of her 1834 violin to Stradivaris she had ever tried.

Additional but notable evidence about maker's attempt to create powerful sound quality is found in his sound box. **Figure 7** displays thickness distributions of table spruce and back maple plates. While the table has distribution of a moderate thickness range of 2.4 to 3.0 mm, the back plate has variation of distribution which is extending up to highly thick 5.8 mm around the sound post area. Reflecting this thickness, back plate weighs 123g, which is fairly heavy and indicates good density and hardness of the plate. The sound box with combination of such strong back plate and the soft top plate may have some effect to enhance the acoustic power. It can be assumed that Pressenda have been aware of the structure and effect of the Cannone del Gesu, a favourite of Paganini. Cannone is peculiar in having thick back plate (up to 6.3 mm) [8] and wide grained top spruce.

Interior of violins shows some habits of the maker which helps the evaluation of authenticity. **Figure 8** shows corner blocks. There is left a score cut by knife at the halfway of the height. Similar knife mark is frequently found in other Pressenda violins. Pressenda was using inner mould. Possibly, the maker was cutting off an upper half of blocks that appears above the inner mould in order to facilitate removal of the mould. Concerning the maker's idiosyncrasy in way of cutting and trimming the corner blocks, Christophe Landon has found out a similar score on a corner block in a Pacherel violin and proposed Pacherel's collaboration in making the soundbox of master's violin [5]. I agree that Pacherel was following the master's fashion in interior work of his own violins. However, instruments completed by Pacherel hardly pass as Pressenda's work by experienced eyes because of lacking in the same quality of dimension employed and craftsmanship expressed by his master. Needless to say, qualities of varnish employed by Pacherel and other French collaborators are essentially different from Pressenda's created by his Italian recipe.

Crafts of Pressenda display high degree of perfection in terms of balance of outline, layout, shape, and choice of wood. On the other hand, he was not offensive about leaving tool marks (purfling and interior), gouge lines (scroll), pins, which are kinds of flaws but intentionally left in Pressenda's craft as a part of his Italian artistry. Tool marks add traces of human touch to his crafts as have been seen in old Italian makers. Varnish remained a main proficiency of this maker although not surpassing those of Cremonese masters. None of his pupils has taken over his recipe. Possibly, the soft varnish retards the finish of violinmaking, and varnish changed to more firm and compact nature towards the last period of violinmaking. Sound qualities of Pressenda violins are unique in terms of having a mixture of old and modern Italian sound in projection. It is tonally rich of harmonic tone in high notes while having darker projection in low notes. Acoustic nature is also a main element that distinguishes Pressenda from French masters in his era.

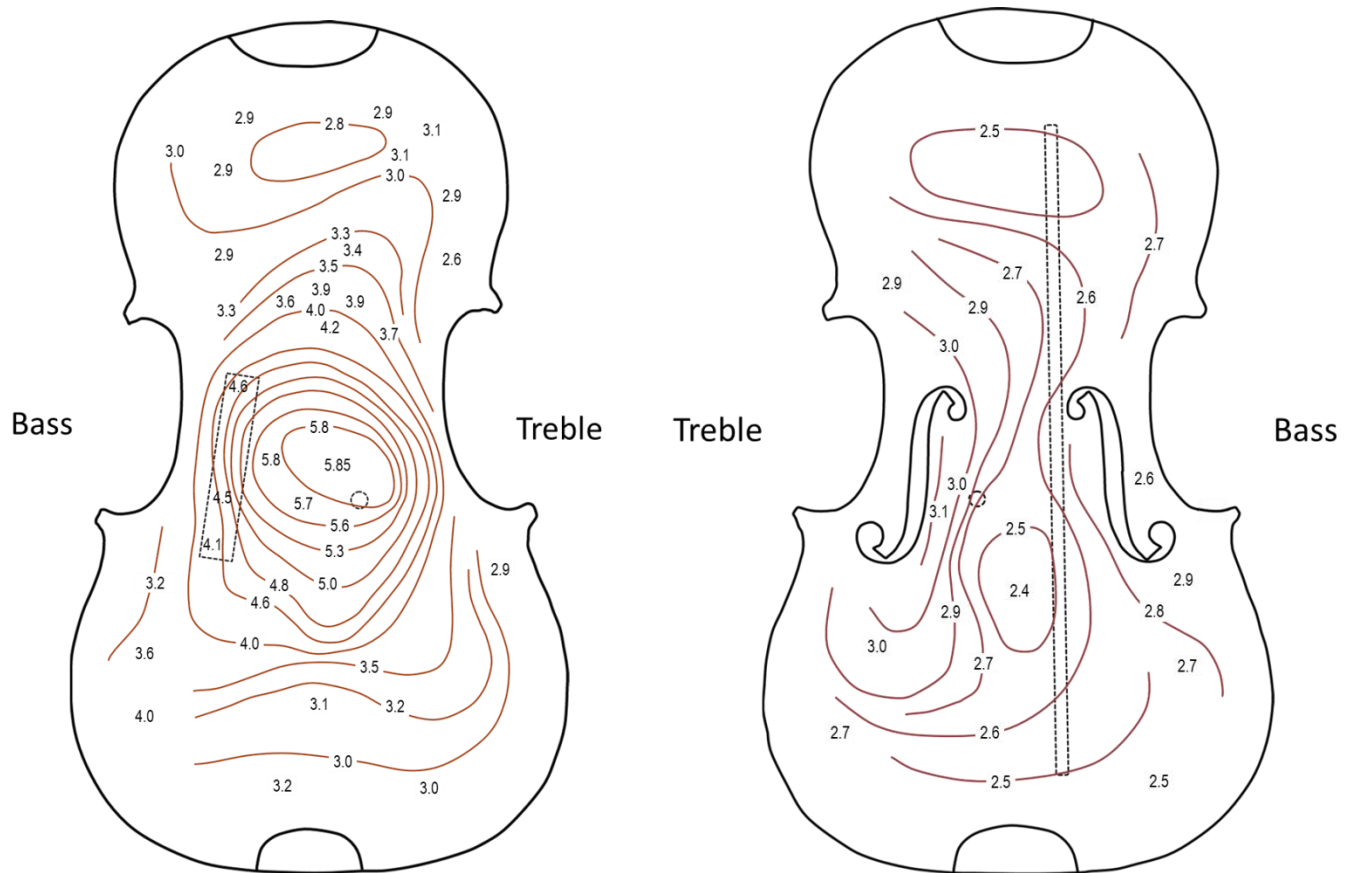


Figure 7. Thickness distributions in the 1834 Pressenda violin on the top and back plate, the latter being as thick as 5.85 mm at the sound post area.



Figure 8. Corner blocks have a knife cut score as the maker's habit in trimming the blocks with the presence of internal mould.

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